

Tajyyk' Ir

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Summary: An adventure from the edge of civilized space. An outback trader is just about to finish up a routine cargo run and return to New Covenant space. Complications arise. A glimpse into an alternate vision of a post-Halo 3 universe.

1. Introduction

A Word from the Author

This story was conceived and mostly written just after the release of Halo 3. I had been thinking about what the future of the Halo universe might look like after the events of Halo 3. "Tajyyk' Ir" is a snapshot of my vision of that universe. It was written before the publication of "Glasslands" and before Halo 4. It does not remotely match Halo canon post-Halo 3, and does not attempt to.

As I suspect is true of all writers everywhere, I encourage and welcome feedback both positive and critical. Most importantly, enjoy!

2. Tajyyk' Ir

"Tajyyk' Ir"

_ Tajyyk' Ir_? Yeah, I know something about _Tajyyk' Ir_. I was _there,_ for chrissake. Santo 'Xantas here, he was there too. Where do you think he got that scar down his side? Where do you think he got his name, for that matter? He was plain old Santo back in the day. Then we lived through _Tajyyk' Ir_ and he decided he'd earned himself an apostrophe, exile or no.

You want to _hear_ about it? You want to know _more_ about it? You want the _gory details_? You're some kind of messed-up masochist, you know that? That or some ISSC spook tryin' to plumb me for juicy details, heh. Anyway, smartest thing you'd do right now would be to

turn around, walk back to the bar, forget about _Tajyyk' Ir_ and hope it never happens within a hundred lightyears of you or me.

You aren't satisfied yet, huh kid? Fine, I'll tell you about _Tajyyk' Ir_. Think of it as my lesson to you and any of your buddies thinkin' about running goods outside the Bubble...

Tajyyk' Ir wasn't too bad a place before it went to hell. Proper space station, not one of those hollow-egg asteroid the Kig-Yar are usually so fond of scattering around their systems. No, whatever enterprising Jackal firm built _Tajyyk' Ir_ knew the chromium deposits on Arctus 175 were gonna make the place a big hub and a great place for a little out-of-Bubble way station, so they assumed they'd get all kinds of customers. They built it big enough for a Mgalekgolo, with amenities for any and every race in the New Covenant â€“ and they got 'em. Now, the place was no Reach Skyhook Suite, but the proprietors had the basics down. Running water. Proper gravity. Flat floors. Decent food. Great bars.

I got a whiff that something was off while I was in one of those bars, a little cave called "The Prophet's Profit", har har. The whole front facade was a relief statue of a prophet, built up from a million bits of scrap metal pillaged from visitors, walls, maintenance shafts, hell, maybe even other stores. It was an old-style prophet, all made-up in robes, arms out and promising salvation for all, but the proprietor'd put cans of beer and liquor in the prophet's hands, made the thing look real cheerful. Funny though, I never saw the same cans twice. I guess they got nabbed a lot.

Anyway, I was sitting in that bar, taking in the ambiance of red lights, rusty steel, and not-quite-recycled air, listening to the raucous shrieking and grumbling of a half-dozen different languages and sipping a can of core-imported wine â€“ pricey stuff â€“ when I sniffed out that something was gonna turn ugly at _Tajyyk' Ir_. I was on the job, so to speak, sifting through datapads of contract work being advertised through the station's wireless.

Great thing about being in the outback â€“ you can work wherever you bloody want, nobody'll bother you. It's not like the outer Bubble places where there's humans all over and a girl has to worry about being alone in a strange place. In the outback it's all Kig-Yar and Unggoy and an occasional Elite or gang of Brutes. They can't tell whether you're a big strong guy like you or a soft and vulnerable woman like me, and frankly they don't care. 'Course, you might get beat up for being a human, but that's fair enough.

That day things weren't sitting right. See, I was having trouble finding a job. Standard fare for a human crate hauler in the Core, maybe, but outside the Bubble there are a _whole_ lot of folks needing something moved elsewhere and not a whole lot of cargo ships with captains willing to venture out there. This was especially true on _Tajyyk' Ir_ 'cause of the mining station down on Arctus 175. Those days they were constantly hiring crates to ship chromium ore from the surface to refineries on the edge of the bubble. Every now and then there'd be an accident planetside â€“ an atmospheric blowout or a fission reactor meltdown â€“ and shipping would stop for a few days, but there hadn't been an accident announcement. The miners were just quietly, conspicuously out of jobs.

After double-checking the wireless a few times, I got a nervous little tingle in my chest. You know the little twinge you get when you feel the local market's gonna go bull and it's time to move your crate to a new sector? Or that awkward moment of nausea when your slipspace drive needs tuning but you jump anyway? It was like that, but worse. Looking back, I'd get all religious and call it the voice of God if I hadn't already heard that story a thousand times — it's what makes me captain and manager of the First Class, and not some Unggoy slob or Kig-Yar smooth-talker.

This was really bad timing, too. We'd been counting on refueling the First Class at Tajyyk' Ir, counting on it bad. We'd been in the deep outback for almost two years, running odd jobs for homesteaders. We'd made a tidy profit, but we'd cut our supplies pretty close. Worse, almost all of our payments were in New Covenant credits, which are useless for trade in the outback. We'd planned to sell our crating services to the miners on Arctus 175 in exchange for fuel, then ride that fuel back to the Core to retire for a few weeks, resupply, and plan our next venture. All of that hinged on getting a job, though, and with none to be found we might find ourselves vacationing at Tajyyk' Ir instead. Worse, if things were going south, we didn't have the fuel to jump anywhere civilized...

I was interrupted from my brow-furrowing by a Kig-Yar's scratchy voice. "Scryyth kak t'ssthlihar, Kaaaayal riyakh." It was Rhoy, my Kig-Yar cultural liaison and contract-sniffer, who slunk out of the smoky murk and white noise of the bar to my side. He was hunched over, head low: a formal stance in Kig-Yar eyes, he liked using it to impress contractors. Behind him was another Kig-Yar, a tall one with sparkling iridescent head-crest feathers and a matching plastic fiber scarf wrapped around his shoulders and arms — the Kig-Yar equivalent of a classy tux. I'd laughed the first time I saw a Jackal dolled up in one of those scarf. Took four months for the bites to heal.

I set down the datapads. "Uh, let me see here," I said while I fumbled with the switch on my bauble earring. Rhoy flashed his platinum-coated teeth my way, which I'm sure was some sort of social gesture to make the other Kig-Yar feel like spending their money on us.

S_nap-hiss, and my earring's translator was online. "There we go. Now, what did you say?"

"Honored Manager Kayle, allow me to present a fellow profiteer," said my earring in a metallic tone when Rhoy replied. "This is Manager-in-Chief Skree, head site manager of the Joyful Plunder Incorporated's Arctus 175 locale." Rhoy stepped aside, and the other Kig-Yar stepped forward.

I picked my feet off the table and leisurely stood to my full height. I'm not a tall woman — barely bigger than an average Kig-Yar — but I'm no waif. Jackals are slight little things when you get down to it, and they're not really comfortable with people of bulky builds like me. I like taking advantage of this fact in sizing up a new Kig-Yar employer. I find it's a good test of character.

This Kig-Yar didn't flinch. He drew himself up to his full height — had a few inches on me, the damned avioid — and grinned that predatory-but-only-looking-to-take-your-money-and-

not-at-all-to-eat-your-babies smile unique to the jackal physiognomy. I could tell that this jackal was going to be trouble... but if he had fuel to offer, I might be willing to look past that.

"I'm Captain Kayle, manager of the cargo hauler First Class. How may we do business today?" Skree extended his hand in a weak imitation of a human handshake, which I declined.

"I have word that you and your crew have experience in salvage operations." Uh oh. Salvage operations were bad news. I shot an angry glance toward Rhoy, who threw up his hands in a perfect human gesture of innocence. "I have a very... delicate task that requires services of someone of your ilk." That wasn't much better.

I sat facing the door and gestured for Skree to do the same opposite me. While he smoothed his scarf, I gave Rhoy a quick hand signal. Get Santo. He acknowledged with a curt nod â€“ a gesture he had picked up purely for my benefit, the little charmer â€“ and scampered off.

I cleared my throat. "Obviously I'll need a little more detail than that, Mr. Skree."

"I... we have a valuable asset on Arctus 175 that requires transport to a core world."

"Which one?"

Skree paused. "Harmony."

Why did he pause? The pause was too long for my taste. Almost as if he hadn't known which world he wanted his cargo taken to. Almost as if he didn't care. Maybe he was desperate to move the asset away, but didn't care where, but that would be downright bizarre â€“ usually when people needed things moved fast, they were moving out of the Core, not into it.

"What kind of payment is your company willing to offer?"

"Joyful Plunder will provide liquid-state slipspace drive fuel for your journey to Harmony."

"Fill our tanks three-quarters and we can talk."

Skree snapped his jaws. "Three-quarters? On a crate the size of yours? Please, captain, don't be absurd. We're practically subsidizing your journey to the Core as it is. All you have to do is carry a small asset from here to there."

So either he was a damned good bluffer or he knew the First Class's specs. Worse, he knew we needed fuel to get out of the system. Damn, Kig-Yar were hard to read. For once in my life, I found myself idly wishing I was sitting across from an Unggoy instead of a Jackal. I could walk all over an Unggoy in negotiation, probably why the little piggies never made headlines.

"You haven't said much about this 'asset' of yours," I said. "What is it you're so desperate to get offworld?"

"We're hardly desperate," Skree replied. "Just because we're willing

to supply some drive fuel doesn't mean we can't hire someone else, or wait for another crate to slip in-system."

I didn't like his tone. It reeked of shrinking profits. "You're not answering the question. I need to know what we're hauling before I make any kind of arrangements."

"That... will be handled groundside."

"You want us to take on unknown cargo and ship it to the Core worlds, and for payment we get travel expenses? You've got to be kidding me."

"Don't think I'm stupid, monkey-biped. My terms are the best you're going to find for a long time around here, and you know it."

Oh yeah, I was having a nerve-wrecking premonitory tingle-of-doom, wasn't I? "We... have other jobs, you know. Goods to haul. And we'll be making other contracts." Not true in the slightest, but Skree didn't have to know that. "How do you expect us to fulfill our contractual agreements with the other parties if we don't know how much load we'll be taking from you?"

Skree bowed his head down a little, a gesture I didn't recognize. "I assure you, it will not add much to your mass nor take much volume. Consider it my... personal luggage on the journey."

"Oh, so you're coming too?"

At last, Skree looked a little uncomfortable. "Yes, that will be required."

"And I'm supposed to take your word that you won't take up my whole cargo bay?"

"No, of course I don't. That will be specified in the contract."

"But the particulars of the item transported won't?"

"Correct."

"Well, then. Hmm. Okay, look, we still don't have a full crew. The Unggoy stalls are slow, and we haven't hired piggies to man all our stations yet. Once we're fully crewed, we'll talk about the particulars..."

"Unacceptable" said Skree with damnable calm. "The job must begin immediately, as soon as we can write up the contract."

I put my fingers to my temples and tried to squeeze the frustration out of my skull. If Skree noticed my annoyance, he showed no sign. "Any other surprises you have for us before the job begins?"

Right around then, Santo walked... no, 'walk' isn't the right word. He cruised into the bar, like a battlecruiser. Eight-and-a-half feet of cobalt-toned Sangheili unfurled through the doorway.

Santo had an unhealthy fascination with human war history, which I've

always thought had somethin' to do with his being exiled from Sanghelios. Every inch of his body was covered in human war souvenirs. His boots were lashed together from a pair of wrecked EVA boots. He had a bandolier of ammo clips slung around his shoulder, and off that hung a rifle clip loaded with ultra-premium-grade Core-imported cigars. His body was covered with an amalgam of Earth-military armor fragments. Some were new and shimmering with micro-shield emitters, while some were pre-Great War, real vintage stuff. Mostly these armor bits were variations on green-and-gray camouflage, but there were reds and purples, bright greens and blacks mixed in there too, even one very expensive gardbrace in opalescent ISSC white.

Topping it all off was a custom-made marine combat helmet, complete with a scrolling-information heads-up display and scalloped side plates. Atop the helmet, a long-outdated UNSC marine officer's cap, skewed at just the right angle. Santo's eyes glowed faintly green off the scrolling light from the helmet's HUD. Patrons of the bar looking into those eyes found themselves glancing elsewhere, and those glances tended to fall on the ancient, well-maintained M6D pistol slung at his hip.

That and the sword.

Skree didn't seem to notice the hush sweeping across the room until Santo " somehow moving silently in all that cobbled armor " was standing practically on top of him. Skree turned to see what was casting the shadow.

This time the bastard did flinch.

"Manager-in-Chief Skree, meet Santo, my bodyguard." In truth, Santo was more than my bodyguard. He was my most trusted partner, security specialist, and my own private army if I ever needed one. I trusted him more than any other sapient in the galaxy. Skree didn't need to know that, though, and if the little squawker wouldn't tell me everything, then I sure as hell wouldn't either. Maybe he'd try to buy Santo off if things got rough. That'd be funny.

Skree recovered quickly, businessman that he was, and introduced himself. Santo leaned himself against the wall and pulled a cigar from his bandolier, which he gripped between his upper and lower jaw. With his long, slender fingers (I swore they looked like ornamentation more than functional members) Santo leisurely took out an ancient, battle-scarred lighter and lit the cigar. Santo growled a terse greeting, which my earring translated for me but which Skree seemed to not understand.

"He says 'hi,'" I said. Skree relaxed. Slightly. "Please excuse me for a few minutes to think this over," I said.

I stood, gripped Santo's arm in greeting (even relaxed, those muscles were solid), and went over to Rhoy, who had slipped in behind Santo to a quiet corner of the bar. "What do you think?"

"That job's bad news," Rhoy said.

"Yeah, I already knew that. I want to know how bad. Is it worth it?"

"I mean... he's desperate. Really, really desperate. Didn't you smell it?"

I gave him an exasperated look, which he somehow managed to translate.

"Of course you didn't. Anyway, I did. He was trying to cover it up with a real expensive, corporate-grade pheromone inhibitor, but I smelled right through that. I guess he wanted to get a little edge in his negotiation."

"Yeah, I could tell he was desperate. We may not really have a choice, though. Without a job, we could be stuck here a really long time. I've got a funny feeling we don't want to be here much longer. Besides, he wasn't exactly willing to lower his price — maybe he's not as desperate as we think. Maybe he's just a little nervous in bars."

"Trust me, he wants us to take this more badly than you think. Remember that quip about us having salvage experience? This job is bad news, and he knows it."

"Still, we don't have a whole lot of options. I'd say we take the job and hope it works out."

"You know, about now I'm of a mind to kill you in your sleep and take command of the First Class myself."

I grinned at Rhoy and grabbed his muzzle. "Try it, and I'll break your beaky little jaw in half, stab you with it 'till you bleed out, and serve your eggs for breakfast in the mess hall."

Rhoy shrugged. I know you folks here in the Core think the Kig-Yar are a bunch of traitorous bastards. Frankly, I don't give a damn. Not that they aren't all bunch of traitorous bastards, but all you have to do is let them know where you and they stand, and they're the most loyal, trustworthy sapients outside of Sanghelios.

"I get the concern, Rhoy, but we really need this job. Have you rounded up enough Unggoy to get us space-worthy?" Rhoy nodded. "Good. Then let's get this contract written up and get this job over with."

The rest of the hour was spent working out contractual details. We were informed that we would also be accompanied by two Joyful Plunder security employees. We agreed that they would be let aboard, provided they be accompanied at all times by Santo and as many jackal guards as he felt he needed pressed into security service (I just wasn't comfortable handing over weaponry to Unggoy, even as light as we were on skilled crew). We also agreed to depart as soon as the contract was signed.

Before we left, I promised the bartender I'd put in a good word for him with the spacers in port. He was a human, believe it or not. Young and cheerful, kind of kitch in in his overalls and sunglasses, but hell, anything human looks hot when you've been in the Outback for a couple years. I promised him I'd stop by again when we returned from Arctus 175, and he flashed me a smile.

I didn't keep my promise.

We met Skree's muscle on the way back to the First Class, just outside the airlock. They were brutes. Big brutes. They slouched against the wall and stared at us like apes. They wore opalescent white armor, real modern ISSC stuff from the looks of it, spotless save for a patch of dull gray on each shoulder where the ISSC insignia had been scratched off. I couldn't imagine where the pair had found tools tough enough to scratch the stuff. They carried heavy-duty ISSC plasma repeaters at their sides, along with spare battery clips.

One of them gestured underhandedly at Santo.

"Hey," he said, "you didn't say we'd be traveling with a split-lip..." The Brute caught himself short.

You've gotta realize that the corridor was built big enough to fit a Mgalekgolo if necessary, but when Santo drew himself to his full height, it seemed positively minuscule. I tensed along with the brutes as Santo swiveled his gaze back and forth between them. The muscles in his arms flowed as his fists wound up once, then unwound. Santo moved his hand towards his weapons, and the brutes leaned away noticeably. Santo stopped, relaxed again, and seemed to smile. He continued walking. The brutes relaxed and went back to slouching.

Before I realized anything had happened, a hundred and twenty centimeters of vintage Japanese steel cut through the air at the foul-mouthed brute. I didn't see the sword's arc, just the sparkling impact between it and the brute's armor. The blade bounced harmlessly off of the combat-grade alloy.

Santo held his pose just long enough for the brutes to figure out what had happened, then sheathed his sword. He slapped the Brute on the shoulder and laughed. The brutes glanced at each other and forced out a few chuckles. Santo stopped laughing and walked into the airlock.

We didn't bother with the flood-sweeper " who does, after the millionth negative? " so soon we were on our way to Arctus 175.

During the station-to-ground transit, I took a few hours off in my quarters. I was interrupted by a raspy little Unggoy voice telling me something was wrong groundside. I doused my face in water to freshen up and trundled to the cockpit.

"What've you got, crew chief?" The cockpit was barely big enough for me and the two Unggoy operators. It stunk of leaked methane and piggy sweat. Pimyat looked at me and threw up his hands.

"Comm's wrong,_," he said.

"Wrong how? Something broken?"

"No, not that. Don't think so. I can't raise ground control, though. All I'm getting on shortwave is a landing request denial on repeat."

"Somethin' must be broken. Lemme take a look at it. And go get our

guest." Pimyat scrambled under his backside control panel and slid past me. I had to climb over the console to get in the operator's seat, which was of course too small.

The damn piggy was right. I couldn't find a thing wrong with the comms â€“ except that they weren't making contact with ground control. I was about to give up and call a grease-monkey from the engine room to the bridge when Skree showed up, shadowed by my bridge operator. Pimyat and I swapped positions while I demanded that Skree explain the comm silence.

"Probably a groundside malfunction. I'm sure it's nothing."

"Groundside malfunction like hell. You corporate types are too damn careful with your equipment to let your comms just break like that. And what's with the repeating clearance denial? You're not telling me something, and I don't like that. Either you tell me what's going on or I turn this crate around." That got him antsy â€“ even I could tell that.

"Alright, alright, there is something wrong. There's been an accident â€“ a big one. Some mining ordinance blew in the upper tunnels, and we lost a lot of oxygen. A lot of people. Too much equipment. Everyone's probably down in the mines trying to patch the place up."

Typical Kig-Yar trade secrets. "So? Why didn't you just tell me?"

"This is worse than you can know â€“ it could end our operation, if cleanup goes badly. We're trying to keep a media blackout on this one. I didn't want to tell you in case you... well, in case you broke the blackout. The airspace denial's there for the same reason. We don't want ships coming in and finding out what happened. I assure you, though, the docking bay is fully operational. Continue your docking procedure."

I should've known something was amiss. I should've at least brought Rhoy up to tell me if Skree was lying. I got cocky, though, I thought that since I'd bullied him into telling me something I hadn't heard before, that I'd bullied him into telling me everything I needed to hear. Take my advice â€“ never assume you're one step ahead of a Kig-Yar businessman. It's unhealthy.

But I was off my game that day. Something about the last run before heading back to the core, it messes with your head, you get overeager, too ready to finish the job no matter what it takes. So I didn't call Rhoy up to the cockpit. I didn't question Skree further. I just ordered Pimyat to bring down the First Class and continue the job.

The docking area was not alright. The docking facility wasn't much more than a giant concrete plane sunk a hundred meters into the ground. The landing area looked intact, but it was hard to see â€“ the main floodlights weren't on, and the pit cast a deep shadow on most of the landing area. Emergency lights coated the shadows in red, but didn't do much to actually illuminate the place. Needless to say, there was no one on the landing pad to greet us. Skree told us that everyone was down in the mines and directed us to the fuel pumping

unit " tucked back in the corner, solidly in the shadows. Of course.

I let the Unggoy work crew go out first. We weren't planning to take on any bulky cargo, so I had them use the ground-level airlock instead of opening the cargo doors. Once we were sure nobody was going to jump out of the shadows and shoot the crew, I found Santo and grabbed us a pair of air masks. Santo insisted we stop by his personal locker and pick up two clips of zero-O2 rounds for his MD6. I didn't see why he bothered. As far as I could see, the pistol was entirely for intimidation " Santo hadn't fired the thing off the shooting range in years. Still, I knew not to get between my Elite and his ammo. I took the time to grab some tool belts, an electrically-insulated jacket, a canteen of water, and a flashlight.

We met Skree and his two Brutes at the airlock. Skree looked ridiculous. His head was covered in an air-mask bubble and he had a weird shimmering-purple cloth draped around him like a wrap. The brutes, tough guys to the core, wore naked O2 cans strapped on their jaws. As the airlock cycled out our O2, Santo made a show of checking and loading his pistol.

The airlock opened, and de-oxygenated shipboard air gusted out, murmuring vaguely. The air outside was thinner and dryer than New Covenant-standard, and I had to blink to keep my eyes from drying out. Other than that and the lack of oxygen, it was pretty much normal nitrous atmosphere. The two brutes gasped and sucked regularly at their O2 canisters. It'd have been comical if they weren't eight feet tall, grumpy-looking, and built like barrels. Furry, muscular barrels.

First I checked in with the Unggoy teams to make sure they had the fuel pumping into our tanks properly. Then Skree took our little party to a personnel lift that would take us underground. The lift worked, if slowly, and also functioned as an airlock. Soon enough the Brutes stopped sucking at their cylinders. I made to take off my air mask, but Santo stopped me and shook his head. "Keep it on," he said. "I don't trust this Kig-Yar's air."

Skree bobbed his head in an imitation of a nod of agreement. "Your muscle's right. We can't be sure how well the lower corridors are oxygenated. It could be pretty difficult to breath down there."

I gave Skree my most commanding glare. "Santo's more than my 'muscle,' thank you very much. He's my first mate, and as this is my mission, you will all give him the respect due to an honored elite."

"Oh?" Skree held his ground. "If Santo is such an honored elite, then what is his clan name?"

I admit, that got my blood fired a bit, and if Santo hadn't blocked me with that spindly hand of his, I'd have up and socked Skree then and there, Brutes be damned. But see, that's why I have him around " when the pressure builds, I get hot and bothered, but Santo just gets cool and sharp.

Santo crouched down in front of Skree and reached for his belt. The Brute twins gave a start at that, but Skree waved them back with a

snap of his beak. "If you hurt me, I'll have your ship grounded and you'll never make it back to the core," Skree said.

"You understand something about me, Skree. I have no family name. I am one without honor, and you are lucky for it, you foolish Kig-Yar. You have no concept of a Sangheili's honor. Were I able protect my honor by hurting you, then all of the threats in the universe would not stop me. Whether or not I survived the attempt, I would hurt you."

One of the brutes unslung the plasma repeater from his back and leveled it at Santo. He gave a growl to make his position clear.

Santo backed away, lit a cigar, peeled his face mask back long enough to inhale a lungfull of smoke. "None of you aliens understand true honor. Honor isn't something you barter and trade. It's not something you can give up at a profit. Being without honor is not living."

"But how," replied Skree, obviously more comfortable without Santo in his face, "can you enjoy your honor if you're dead?"

Skree and Santo gave each other such looks that I thought their translators had broken. Then I realized, they just didn't get each other.

Before things got any more philosophical, the elevator screeched to a halt and announced that we had reached the administrative level. Santo snapped his face mask back into place. As the doors opened, there was another whistle of air exchange, and the red ember on the end of Santo's cigar flickered out.

The corridor was bigger than I expected, poorly lit and empty. By the looks of it, the miners had braced up the walls of an old excavation tunnel with ship-grade supports and slapped down grates to walk on. Lamps hung dead from the ceiling about three meters above our heads, and emergency illuminator strips above those barely cast everything in dim grays. I was glad we brought flashlights.

"You two stay here, keep watch on the elevator," said Skree.

"Keep watch?" I asked. "Keep watch for what? No, don't answer. How about your two cronies here 'keep watch,' and we come with you to pick up whatever it is you dragged us down here for. And before you try to bully me otherwise, remember that I'm still the one with the ship. I can always leave you here and find another contract."

Skree opened his beak as though to reply, then thought better of it. He motioned to his two guards, then ushered us down the corridor.

"Hey beak-face," I asked once we were out of sight of the elevator. "Care to tell me why you thought you needed bodyguards for visiting your own goddamn mining base? You got enemies down here or something?"

"Something like that."

"Care to explain?"

"No. And before you try to bully me otherwise, remember that I'm the one with your fuel. Don't press me, Kayle."

I shut up and followed the jackal around a corner to the left, then around the corner to the right, then I lost track. We passed a bunch of doors I assumed led to offices. The seal of each door was lit deep purple. I'd been on enough Kig-Yar bases to know that the purple meant a locked door. That didn't worry me too much, though. You may not know this, here on the Core worlds, but auto-sealing doors are a standard safety feature on any station without breathable atmosphere, just as on starships. Panicking workers trying to run from a fire are a real hazard to a station's oxygen, something Kig-Yar managers are keenly aware of. I wasn't surprised that all of the station's offices had been locked down after the accident. I wondered how many workers were trapped inside. I didn't hear anyone screaming for help, so I felt no need to check.

One last turn, and we came to a door at a dead end. This one wasn't sealed, at least not well. It looked like someone had wedged one of the doors halfway open, and they looked worse for the wear. Skree bounded to the door and palmed the center. The purple seal on the remaining door-half flickered to yellow and the door slid obligingly aside.

It was a small office room, jackal-sized and cluttered with datapads and empty drink pouches. A small info-server rack lay fallen on the floor. It was a mess, but what really concerned me was the blood. Liters of purple blood, jackal blood, splattered across the walls and smeared all over the floor. Skree looked unsteady on his feet. Santo pulled out his MD6 and snapped off the safety.

"What the...? Skree, you've got some explaining to do, and do it quick."

Skree scampered to the terminal at the desk.

"There was an accident," Skree said, typing away at the terminal. "A terrible accident, just as I said. The blood must be my assistant's. At least, I hope so... we'll know soon." A final keystroke, and a jackal-sized bit of the wall opposite the door slid aside. A dim light snapped on in the space behind it, shedding a pale spotlight on a dead jackal, beak agape and eyes wide in some sort of alien rictus. No head-crest on that jackal, either, so it was a female. Behind and beneath the corpse were about half a dozen canteen-sized, pill-shaped things, all a sickly matte green. Skree ran to the corpse and cradled it in his arms, and let out a warbling noise I'd never heard before or since.

"Uh, okay, this is freaking me out, Skree. You gonna fill us in?"

Skree snapped his beak at me. "This was Tchk-Tchkey, my fourth wife and local mate. These," he waved at the capsules, "are my children."

"Uh," I said, "Huh."

"Why are your wife and eggs in this...?" asked Santo.

"Wall safe. It's a wall safe. Designed to hold that," Skree gestured to the toppled server rack, "and the company information contained in it. Keep it from falling into... competitors' hands. Tchk-Tchkey must have dumped out the rack and sealed herself and the eggs in here, to keep them protected. The safe isn't designed for people. No ventilation â€“ that wouldn't be secure. She suffocated to death protecting our children. A perfect mother." Skree closed the corpse's jaws and laid its limbs out.

"So, uh, this is your cargo?"

"Yes. Of course, yes. Give me a minute." Skree unwrapped the shimmering purple cloth from his shoulder. He folded the cloth on itself and started scooping the eggs into it, like some kind of satchel.

I wasn't finished with him. "Alright, Skree, I'm not still not getting it. What kind of..."

"Stop," said Santo, quietly. "Listen. Skree, what is that sound?"

It was a kind of muted chirping, like birds singing underwater. I could barely hear it over the sound of my own heartbeat, but then my ears are just human.

Skree could hear it just fine. "It's coming from around the corner at the end of the hallway," he said. "Check it out, I'll finish here in a minute."

Santo nodded and clicked a round into his pistol.

"Wait just one damned minute," I said. "Why're you giving orders 'round here? I'm not..."

Santo stopped me then with a hand on my shoulder. "We should do as he says, right now." That was all I needed to hear. I flicked a middle finger at Skree, nodded to Santo, and we left the room. When we peeked around the corner of the corridor, we got our first look at the Flood.

There were four jiggling balls of the fleshy, pustular things, complete with a mass of writhing little frond-tipped stalks. They weren't big, maybe the size of your head. Creepy as hell, but they didn't look like the stuff of nightmares, not unless you'd heard stories about the things. I used to think those horror tales were ISSC propaganda. Not anymore.

While I was busy gaping at the things, Santo stepped in front of me, M6D in hand, BAM! BAM BAM! I jumped at the thunderous noise and covered my ears. The first two shots ricocheted off the corridor with a puff, the third hit a flood ball square on, and the thing popped violently, coating the walls around it with yellow bits like snot. The explosion tore apart the two nearest Flood balls, which themselves exploded. BAM! Santo put a bullet through the last one.

"What, what the fuck? Was that... were those fucking...? God damn!, we need to get out of here!" At least, I think that's what I said â€“ I couldn't hear anything over the ringing in my ears. Santo bellowed something. "What?!"

Santo pulled me close. "_FLOOD_! We're leaving, now. If Skree wants off this rock, he'll follow." We took off down the corridor. I had no idea where we were, but Santo seemed to know where he was going, so I followed him. We ran down corridor after dimly-lit corridor. I'm no marathon runner, and soon I was gasping at my O2 canister.

Now, sometime during that horrible flight I had to wonder why I'd decided I had really needed to go with Skree on the mission. Sure, I'm the captain, it's my business to keep tabs on my missions, but did I really have to go out in person? What was I doing here on a Flood-infested planet, running for my life? The most embarrassing part of it, looking back, was thinking I'm the captain, I'm supposed to be in charge, and I'm just slowing down the Elite. "I'll never hear the end of this back home." No matter that the whole point of bringing a Sangheili on my ship was for being better than me at handling stuff like this. Pride strikes at the weirdest damned times.

I was about to give up and collapse when I saw the elevator up ahead. That gave me an extra burst of adrenaline, and I sprinted the remaining distance. There was no sign of the brutes. The moment we were in, Santo slammed the controls to close the door, but I hit an override to keep them open.

"Keep... open," I said, gasping for air. "We wait... for Skree."

"No!" Santo had a glint in his eye that I hadn't seen in a long time. He gripped my shirt and roughly drew my face toward his. "You will escape from here alive. If you survive this, I might feel a touch of honor in my blood."

"You think... you think we can cut our ship loose... without that bird-brain's say-so? He's thought of that. We wait."

Santo growled in frustration and pushed me away to the wall, which I was glad to lean against. He paced back and forth in the lift, but at least he didn't clobber me over the head and drag me away.

I heard quick footsteps, pit-pit-pit, at the end of the corridor. Santo readied his pistol again. Skree dashed around the corner, bag of eggs over his shoulder like a sack of loot, seconds ahead of a pack of Flood-balls. Santo unloaded the remainder of his clip over Skree's shoulder, popping some of the closer Flood. Skree slid to a halt in the elevator, and the elevator doors ground shut just in time. Santo reloaded his pistol.

I recoiled from Skree and pointed to his back. "Is that stuff contagious?" Skree's back was flecked with little yellow bits of exploded Flood.

"I don't think so," said Skree. "Besides, your ship has a working flood-sweeper, right?"

I didn't answer. The ride up was... awkward.

"Hey Skree, where're your thugs?"

Skree slumped visibly. "I have no idea. I haven't heard anything from

their comms."

"Probably infected by the flood," Santo ventured.

"Silently?" I asked. "Not even a bark? Shouldn't we have heard something from them if they were getting their brains sucked out?"

"No," said Skree, "We wouldn't. I was afraid they might be attacked, so I disabled their comms before we left. I didn't need you hearing their screams and panicking."

I'd have punched Skree, but I didn't want to put my fists anywhere near the Flood flotsam on his back. Fortunately, Santo knew me well, and he put a boot in Skree's face with a roundhouse kick, just hard enough to draw blood from his eye but not hard enough to dislodge his brain too much. Skree straightened himself wiped off his face.

"So," I said. "Care to tell us what's going on now? We can't exactly get more angry with you."

Skree made a hand-gesture that I was pretty sure amounted to a shrug. "What's more to say? There's flood here. I don't know how, I don't know why. I found out when a couple of managers tried paging me for help, looking for an evacuation. I came here for my eggs, and now that I have them, I intend to leave."

"Yeah, sure, of course, you came to save the fucking kids. Next time you want to commit suicide on some sappy-ass family rescue mission, don't hire me to help you." Skree had nothing to say to that, and I had no more to say to him.

The elevator shuddered to a halt. Santo aimed for the door as it opened. Outside... a plasma repeater in a shallow pool of red blood. Now it was my turn to get queasy. The First Class sat a hundred or meters or so from the elevator, surrounded by deep gloom. As I suspected, we wouldn't be lifting off without Skree's permission — a giant claw-hand, probably a crate-hauling arm, was solidly attached on the First Class's side. Skree pointed to the claw. "When we're aboard, I'll signal for the claw to retract and we'll be on our way."

"Right," I said.

"We must move quickly," said Santo in gravelly bass. Skree picked up the plasma repeater, and we moved.

We'd almost gotten to the airlock when we heard screams in the dark. Unngoy screams of panic and fright, and monstrous gurgling noises, almost speech but not quite formed into words. Santo aimed his M6D toward the cries just as a Brute leaped from the darkness.

At least, it was mostly Brute. Most of its opalescent ISSC armor was still intact, though spattered with blood. Where it had split open, I could see that its skin was a flaking yellow-brown underneath. Its arms were distended and tipped with foot-long boney claws.

I didn't have much time to gawk at the Flood-Brute. I only saw it jump, and damn could it jump. Santo, my better half, reacted like a true soldier. He dropped his pistol to the ground and drew his sword,

thumbing it on as he did so. White-hot plasma covered the ancient Japanese blade in a crackling sheath. Santo held his stance for a second, then he cut the sword diagonally at the leaping Brute. There was a blue-hot flash as the blade cut effortlessly through the monster, and steaming Flood-infested flesh and guts exploded around Santo.

The thing's upper torso landed near me, and I got a better look at it head. The creature that had infected it had forced its way through the Brute's skull and split it into three pieces. Frond-tipped tendrils had forced their way through the brute's mouth, its nostrils, one of its eye-sockets. There was no sign of that eye, but the other one still twitched around in its socket.

I was still gawking when Skree, plasma repeater still in hand, grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me to the airlock. I saw Santo turn to face a second attacker running at him from the darkness. The Flood struck at him with a clawed hand. Santo twisted back away from the blow, and sparks flew from armor on his side. A flash of purple splattered to the ground. Santo dropped into a deep crouch and windmilled his blade in a circle in front of him, severing the Flood's arm at the elbow. Another spin of the blade over his head split the flood open at chest-level. Superheated liquid bubbled from the top half as it fell to the ground, and the bottom half stepped around uncertainly before losing its balance and falling. Santo leaped toward and rolled into the airlock. As soon as he was in, Skree thumbed the door controls and they slid shut.

I thumbed the wall comm. "Rhoy, tell Pimyat to get us out of here, no expense spared."

"_The fueling crew hasn't come aboard yet. We'll lift off as soon as...."

"Forget the Unggoy! Just get us out of here!"

"They are your crew," said Santo. "You should not throw their lives away so casually."

"Not now, Santo. We're leaving, no delay."

"_But the fuel lines are still..._"

"I know, Rhoy, and I really don't care. And yes, I know about the clamp. It's being dealt with." I shot a glare at Skree, who nodded. He had a tiny comm device in his hand and was inputting some kind of code. "We're leaving now." I turned off the comm, then flipped it on again. "And warm up the flood-sweeper. We're not coming through without a scan, and I think we're gonna need a shower."

The First Class gave a lurch upward with a deep shudder and a scream of failing metal, and I felt my weight double and triple before the First Class's internal gravity kicked in. I tried not to imagine the fuel spewing out of our still-open tank, but that just made me think about it more. There was no way we'd have enough fuel to run the Shaw-Fujikawa drive by the time we hit orbit, even for a single jump. Still, at least we were free and clear of Arctus 175, and reserves would get us back to Tajyyk' Ir.

We all tried to relax in our own ways while the flood-sweeper warmed

up. I just laughed off the tension, probably would've looked like a moron to any human who'd seen me right then. Skree opened up his satchel and laid out his eggs reverently in a line, checking each one for damage. Santo ripped the damaged armor off his flank and examined it. It had been shredded nearly in two, and there was a nasty-looking gash in his flank under the armor. Santo flicked a bit of Brute-flood-thing off his face and laughed heartily. "An honorable wound," he said. "This will do nicely."

"_Sweeper's ready,_" said Rhoy over the intercom. "_I'm going to give you a shower first. Close your eyes. I apologize â€“ this will hurt._"

We got a thorough, five-minute rinsing in scalding water with a hint of sulfuric acid. It was agonizing. Even with my eyes clamped shut, they burned. Vision's never been quite as good since then. Santo roared with righteous fury when the stuff hit his wound. At least I could breathe â€“ the oxygen mask took care of that. Afterward, we were rewarded with a cold, sterile shower of water.

Eyes still watering, I groped my way to the intercom and fumbled it on. "Rhoy? What's the sweeper reading?"

"_A minute, please. Still scanning. Uh, looks like you're not clear, repeat, you have a positive Flood read._"

"What? Where?"

"_One of the eggs, the third one from you... it's infected._"

I turned to Skree, horror in my expression. Damned hormones kicked in, motherly instinct and all, and for a moment I could see Skree less as a corporate cutthroat who'd almost gotten us killed and more as a parent trying to save his children from certain death. Now, after running into hell and back, risking his life and reputation to rescue them from a Flood-infested mine, Skree had just been told that one of his children was infected and would have to die.

I'd have given him my condolences if he'd given me the chance, but the bastard just kicked the egg away from the rest and blasted it with his plasma repeater. When there was nothing left but cinders and a nasty crater in the deck, Skree slung his rifle and asked, "Is it clear now?"

"_Please hold, I'm restarting the sweep._"

Santo grunted. "The bird has some spine," he muttered.

Skree shrugged. "With luck, it was a girl anyway."

It must be a jackal thing.

When Rhoy gave us the OK, I went straight to my bunk, where I shivered off the rest of my adrenaline rush. If I'd stayed sharp, I'd have interrogated Skree, if for no other reason than to see him squirm, but at the time I really didn't give a damn about anything but not being on Arctus 175, and my quarters seemed like a good place to start doing that. Skree took his eggs and locked himself away in his cabin before any of the Unngoy crew got a shot at him.

Some hours later, Rhoy called me to the cockpit. Tajyyk' Ir wasn't broadcasting its normal chatter. That's when I knew things weren't going to get better for a while. I ordered us to park a few dozen kilometers from the station and listen for any activity. After twenty minutes of waiting, we heard something, and it was our worst fears come to life.

It was a jackal, a young one. He'd been fleeing for his life through the station's ducts for more than an hour. He'd finally nabbed a short range transmitter, and with it he told us all about the ship that had quietly drifted up from Arctus 175 and forcibly docked with Tajyyk' Ir. He told us about the horrors that had spilled out of its airlock, overwhelming the station security in moments, about the things that got up from the carnage and ran around the station, killing everyone they found. When his legs finally gave out and the monsters descended on him, the jackal screamed for help. The Flood didn't bother shutting off the transmitter as they tore him apart.

"I'll be in the cargo hold," I told Rhoy as the scope of the disaster started to sink in. "I don't want to be disturbed, unless you're bringing some damned good liquor."

Santo found me there not much later, sitting against a crate of rations, cradling an ancient bottle of brandy. He was still decked out in armor, sword at his side.

"Hey," I said, "My orders was nobody disturb me 'less they bring liquor."

Santo slumped beside me and handed over a wicked-looking blue bottle. "So I hear. Try this."

"Thanks." I took the bottle. "Hey Santo, y'remember that kid back on New Faraday? The one who got his ranch started off our supply run?"

"He gave you that brandy, did he not?"

"Hey, don't interrupt me. Anyway, I always kidded myself that I'd save this here bottle for some really special occasion. I never woulda, though. Hell, the thing's too priceless to drink." I took a sip of the brandy. "Too bad the poor bastard's gonna burn with the rest of us. Once word gets back to New Covenant space that the Flood's back, those cozy bastards on the Ark will light the rings, and everyone outside the Bubble's gonna get fried!" I threw my arms wide to show my enthusiasm. "And then everyone in the Bubble will say 'Oh, how terrible! Poor bastard criminals out in the wilds got themselves Halo-ed. Oh well, good thing the alpha and delta ring can't kill us anymore,' and they'll go back to their lives..."

"Is this how humans celebrate their impending annihilation? With aged liquor and bad speeches?"

I laughed. "Yeah, some of us. Drown away the sorrows, y'know? What about you? You got some sort of rituals? Some kinda Elite voodoo? Sorry, Sangheili voodoo? Something to get your mind off your 'pending annihilation'?"

"I have performed all of the required rituals. I should spend my final hours bringing honor to my name, but since I cannot, I shall spend my time with you, my commander, as it should be."

"Thanks, Santo. You know, you're a real pal, 'specially for an alien." I took a swig from Santo's bottle. "Yelch. Tastes like bulkhead cleaner. Why do you, uh, whya... oh..."

Santo grinned, a gleam in his eye, and then the gleam turned into a symphony and then things got weird for a few seconds. When the room stopped spinning and the colors of the pixies in the wall stopped babbling at me, he said, "I have been told that to humans, it is not unlike taking hallucinogens on a roller coaster, whatever that means."

"Yeaah, sounds right about right. You drink this stuff on Sanghelios?"

"Yes, though only on very particular eves. Its effect on the Sangheili nervous system is more... subtle. The herb from which it is extracted was used by ancient shamanic heretics, in the time before the Covenant when such deviants were allowed to live and breed. Some of their rituals survived absorption into the Covenant."

"Why didn't you ever tell me 'bout this stuff? To special for humans?"

"Yes. Also, in humans it is a strong carcinogen. That bottle would shorten your expected lifespan by ten years if you weren't going to die here today."

"Goddamn. Don't mind if I have some more... here, try some of this brandy! You'll love it, scoundrel like you."

"No. Alcohol... is a strong tranquilizer to Sangheili. I wish to spend my remaining moments awake."

"You saying elites can't take alcohol? Wait 'till my momma hears that one..."

Santo kicked at a loose bolt on the floor. "It is not a widely-publicized fact. Besides, that liquid smells vile to my nose."

"Nah, it's s'posed to smell like that. Tastes even worse, but's damned great stuff..."

We sat there, debating the relative points of Sangheili and human drinks, until the liquor started to run dry. Then we sat some more, enjoying the side-effects. I have to admit, Sangheili may not be the most fun at parties, but they know how to make drugs.

Then I got a great idea, and I ordered Rhoy to turn the ship around and head back toward Arctus 175. For the next couple of hours, I asked Santo to show me how to fire his pistol, which he seemed honored to do. It took a while for me to get used to the noise, but before too long he had me shooting bottles across the cargo bay. My aim wasn't great, and I didn't hit many bottles until I discovered you could just put a round into the crate beneath them and let shrapnel from the explosive rounds finish off the bottles. That got a

laugh out of Santo.

Once we were sure I wasn't going to blow my own foot off, Santo smacked his fists together, eyes glistening.

"Fight me," he said.

"What?" I said.

"Fight me! Be brave at your end, human!"

I was drunk and about to die anyway, so I up and belted him across his four-piece jaw. He responded with a throaty roar and a tackle that knocked the wind out of me. Santo sprung back to his feet.

"Again!" he said.

"Sure," I grunted, and got back to my feet.

"Y'know, Santo, you've never told me your family name," I said. I dropped into what I thought looked like a boxer's crouch.

"I have none. You know this." Santo didn't bother with a fighting stance.

"Yeah, but, I mean, before. Before you got your name taken away, what was it?"

Santo considered his answer while he swatted away my jabs. "Xantasoo. Santo Xantasoo. Xantas is my lineage. The suffix 'oo' is a mark of great scholarship."

"Scholarship, huh?" I stopped for breath. "So you were a teacher?"

"A philosopher. A thinker. Like your Sun Tsu." Santo blocked my punch, grabbed my wrist, and flung me to the ground. "My place was to judge the merit of ideas too complex for military men and not controversial enough to be immediately condemned as heresy."

"I didn't think you Elites had philosophers," I said as I got back to my feet.

Santo shrugged. "It is a rare profession, and not respected by all, but even the most bullet-headed in the aristocrats begrudgingly accept its value to our people, especially after the betrayal of the Prophets, may their names be forgotten. Now stop talking and fight me!"

I threw a few more punches at Santo, but he didn't even block them this time. Santo laughed and spread his arms wide, inviting me to hit him. I wound my arm back and gave him a good sock, right in the chest, even got a huff and a stagger out of him. "Good!" He growled before hitting me with an open-palmed strike to the chest that sent me to the ground.

I looked Santo over and tried to imagine him giving lectures in a college classroom. It wasn't working. "So, uh, what'd you study?"

"You. I studied Humanity. It is why I was banished from my people."

Santo offered an arm and pulled me to my feet.

"Aw, come on, we're not that bad," I said.

"Yes, you are," said Santo with neither malice nor apology. "We respect your kind, and you have honor in our eyes for your part in the Great War and for your presently prominent role in the galaxy. But your people have no code, no honor in your own eyes. We could never be like you, as much as it may cost us as a people."

"You sayin' that you got kicked off Sanghelios for studying us dirty monkeys?"

"No, that is not right exactly. There is nothing wrong with studying Humanity, not in itself, nor from learning about your accomplishments and understanding you as a race. That is no shame at all — any sane general seeks to understand his enemy, however wretched. That was not my crime.

"My crime was to suggest that we need to adopt your ways, that we must for our kind to survive in the galaxy. I studied your history. I know how you humans have fought your wars since you were bashing each other with rocks. I have studied what war means to your kind, and how it affects you. I had to understand how your people were able to resist the Covenant for so long. Your technology was vastly inferior to ours, your numbers far fewer, your society split by rebellion. I still do not fully understand, but I did learn one thing your people have that we lack that may have made all the difference — forgiveness."

"Forgiveness? You're kidding, right?" I threw myself in a tackle right at Santo's legs, but he bent those backward-pointing knees and rolled over me, grabbing me as he went.

"When a Sangheili fails in battle, it stains him forever. Do you yield?" Somehow he'd gotten me on the ground, under him, with his leg firmly locked over my throat and my legs pinned at the knees by his hands. They were stronger than they looked. "When a leader fails to bring victory in battle, it is his end. He cannot retain his command. He may regain some of his honor by offering his head to his superiors, but even then his name will not be sung proudly by his children. For the Prophets' sake, yield already." I gave up squirming and tapped the ground. Fortunately Santo figured out what I meant.

"What about... Whew, let me catch my breath. Huh. You just had to go for the throat, didn't you?"

"You should have yielded sooner, if you wanted a more pleasant spar."

"Anyway, what about the Arbiter? Wasn't he some kind of screw-up?"

Santo flicked a hand at me. "Arbiters are exceedingly special cases. To become an Arbiter is to die. An Arbiter's mission is always a suicidal one, and so becoming an Arbiter is its own form of execution, the most honorable. But Arbiters are only called upon in the most desperate situations. For most Sangheili, failure is the end."

"That's not so different from our corporate culture," I joked.

Santo missed the humor. "No, it's not like that at all! When a human fails, even when he is rejected from his post, he may seek honor in another role. He might take another profession, and apply his skills there. Worse, outright failure can be forgiven. When your soldiers are injured in battle, you bring them without question to your doctors to have them healed. We have no doctors on the battlefield. If a Sangheili is injured in combat, he either survives by his own will and abilities or he dies."

I threw a jab at Santo's face, and again he grabbed and used my momentum to send me sprawling, but this time I was ready and grabbed his shoulder, and we both went sprawling. Still, Santo somehow twisted around so that when we were on the ground, he was on top with his arm over my throat. He smelled tangy, like he was sweating battery acid. This time, I didn't hesitate to tap out.

"During the Great War, the most common cause of death among Sangheili serving the Covenant was explosive decompression during ship-to-ship combat, followed by death at the hands of the Demons. The third most common cause of death was execution." Santo let me up. "More Sangheili above the rank of Major were slain by execution to regain their honor than by all of your military operations combined, save a few catastrophic fleet losses. Turnover rate among Ship Masters and Field Masters was... extreme, far more so than your generals ever knew.

"Losses from execution were, of course, insignificant numerically. We had far more than enough soldiers to replenish the fallen. The loss to our experience, however, was debilitating. Your great war heroes saw countless victories, countless losses. Ours never saw more than a single defeat. In Sangheili understanding, a great leader is one who cannot fail, so a leader who fails is not worthy of his title. We did not realize that even a perfect leader can lose a battle, even by chance. So we slew our best warriors, again and again. Had we not, I am confident that we would have handily crushed your species before the Great Schism."

"Good thing you didn't, or you'd have had a tough time with those pesky Prophets."

"Yes, in that sense we were lucky to fail so miserably to put an end to your kind, but that was historical accident. The next time our people are put to the test, we may not be so lucky. Even now, we languish." Santo casually blocked my feint and spun away from my followup. "Why do you think it is that New Covenant politics are dominated...?" he snapped my punch out of the way, grabbed my arm, and flung me past him, "...by humanity? Why are the largest social and economic institutions in the Bubble built by humanity, and virtually none by Sangheili? I believe it is because every human grows not only from success..." I stomped down on Santo's instep, and he casually kicked, sending me wildly off balance, "...but from failure." A second kick with the other leg sent me to the floor again. "My people can no longer afford the luxury of casting aside those who fail. We must adopt your... forgiveness if we hope not to fade into obscurity. We need to accept that those who fail can still be of great value.

"I developed this theory in great detail, in secret. I hid the thrust of my work behind mundane research into human battlefield logistics. Then, when I was ready, I presented my ideas to a council of elders. You might call it my great thesis. It was controversial â€“ I was detained for my heresy while the council debated the merits of my proposal. After days of discussion, they decreed that my proposal was heretical and corrosive to Sangheili morality, and I was stripped of my title and banished from my homeworld."

I stopped trying to get a punch in and backed off. "So you got banished because you thought that you Elites might not want to execute every one of you who's ever failed a mission?"

"Yes."

"Well, their loss." I put my hands up and threw a few more futile punches at Santo. My hands were chafed near raw by then, but punching still seemed better than brooding. "Sounds like those elders couldn't tell right from wrong if you smacked 'em over the head with it."

Santo stood to his full height, fists clenched. "Of course they know right from wrong! Were you not my commander, I would snap your neck for suggesting otherwise." I took the opportunity to give him a roundhouse kick to the chest, which he took while casually grabbing my kicking leg. "The elders are correct â€“ my ideas are corrosive to Sangheili morality." He released my leg and sent me staggering. "You think it somehow acceptable to forgive the weak? It is abhorrent! It is against that which is Sangheili! If we put that into practice, it would destroy our honor, our way of life. We would be no better than the Prophets, may their names be forgotten." The rage passed from Santo's eyes, and he seemed to shrink. "We need to change to survive in this universe, but that does not make it right. What I proposed is evil. That it would benefit our species does not change that."

I had nothing to say to that, so we sparred in silence after that. I didn't come any closer to taking down Santo, but to his credit, he didn't break more than a nose, maybe a spleen.

When we were in visual range of Arctus 175, I put my brilliant plan into action â€“ we put the visual feed of Arctus 175 up on the cargo bay vidscreen and shot the display to hell with Santo's pistol.

I was trying to figure how close the last hole I'd put in the screen was to the mine when, out of nowhere, ten kilometers of glassy purple rebellion-crushing InterStellar Space Command supercruiser, bristling with plasma launchers and mass-accelerator cannons, jumped in between the First Class and the horizon. I'd never been so glad to see ISSC colors in my life, and I never have since. They started their evening off with a trio of MAC rounds to the surface, which blew the mining facility into a metropolis-sized crater. While I cheered and hugged Santo, the supercruiser began its ten-hour glassing operation on the site of the infestation, and with that the worse nightmare of my life was over.

The ship was, was, of course, the Leviathan of Respite, one of four supercruisers in the Ark's First Response Defense Fleet. The Leviathan wasn't famous back then, so we only learned its name when

they took us into quarantine. Once they were sure we weren't bearing plague, they took us back to Core space to be on our merry way. First, though, they spent two weeks hunting the system for survivors and rogue ships bearing... well, not bearing survivors, if you catch my drift. In that time, they did find two other survivor ships wandering the system, an Unngoy passenger liner and a cargo hauler crewed by jackals. We never found out if there were survivors on Tajyyk' Ir â€“ the commander of the Leviathan declared it an infested zone and they disintegrated it.

Between our three crews, we survivors pieced together the story as best we could. The miners had run across Flood spores on the surface of Arctus 175. Not knowing what they were, they took them into the mines, to their labs. Nobody knows what triggered the spores to wake up, but when they did, the infection was fast and brutal. Only a handful of Joyful Plunder executives and a skeleton crew of miners managed to get off-world to Tajyyk' Ir, where they quietly canceled all of their shipping contracts. Then they left the system or went to ground on the station, probably fearing public backlash if anyone heard that they'd released Flood. Or maybe they didn't want the New Covenant to Halo the galaxy while they were still around. I guess none of them were bright enough to consider that the Flood might get off of Arctus 175. I'd have pressed Skree on it, but some New Covenant leathernecks took him off the ship as soon as we cleared quarantine, whether for amnesty or interrogation I never found out.

I still don't know for sure why the New Covenant sent the Leviathan of Respite to clean up instead of firing the rings. My best guess, somebody in Joyful Plunder Inc has a lot of sway with some top New Covenant brass, and thought they could salvage something from that wretched planet if they didn't fire the rings. I ain't complaining â€“ me and my crew got to live, and that guy on New Faraday got to live to see his two girls come of age and get a Core education. Still, if you ask me, I'm still not sure it was the right call.

So that's the story of Tajyyk' Ir. The lesson? You want a lesson from that? This isn't some holo-novel, moral and uplifting ending factory-included. It just happened. Some miners screwed up their operating hygiene and a lot of people died for it.

I guess here's your moral â€“ it's a fucking dangerous universe out there. You think the galaxy's goin' just fine, us out there busy turning every planet we find into playgrounds, and then bam, one sorry little spore puts an end to you and everything you've ever done. But the real kicker? The galaxy got real, real lucky at Tajyyk' Ir. What if we hadn't cleared quarantine on that supercarrier? Or if we'd been carrying spores, but cleared quarantine anyway? What if one of those spores on Arctus 175 got some kinda mutation, got invisible to sweepers, and what if it had latched to our hull? Boy, a civilian station full of Flood is bad enough, but I really don't want to see a battle-ready supercruiser full of 'em.

So next time you're out partying, or spending some creds in the shopping ring, count your blessings. Next time, we might not get so lucky. Next time, we might not find them in the Outback. Next time, it might be in the Bubble, where the Rings don't cleanse. And for the love of all that's good, don't skimp on the flood sweeper â€“ 'cause it only takes one Flood to ruin your day.

Now, if you're satisfied with that, let me tell you 'bout the time
Santo and I met a real live drone on Reach...

End
file.